



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

Southeast Regional Office  
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December 21, 2006

F/SER4

Mr. Chris C. Oynes, Regional Director  
Minerals Management Service  
Gulf of Mexico OCS Region  
1201 Elmwood Park Blvd.  
New Orleans, Louisiana 70123-2394

Dear Mr. Oynes:

The Habitat Conservation Division of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southeast Region has reviewed the Minerals Management Service's (MMS) letter dated November 16, 2006, and the accompanying draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the Gulf of Mexico OCS oil and gas lease sales for the Central and Western Planning Areas (CPA and WPA, respectively) for years 2007-2012. Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act and the essential fish habitat (EFH) provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the MMS has requested review of the DEIS and has initiated EFH consultation activities in the WPA and CPA for the proposed 5-year program. The DEIS includes both a detailed description of EFH within the WPA and CPA and a complete EFH assessment.

The MMS and NMFS coordinated the review of post-lease activities in the Gulf of Mexico under a programmatic EFH consultation that was finalized in 1999. That document is currently being updated to address revised planning area boundaries. In consonance with the programmatic EFH consultation, MMS has incorporated previously accepted EFH conservation recommendations provided by NMFS in addition to their standard environmental stipulations. MMS proposes to continue to require impact avoidance and mitigation measures to ensure that adverse impacts to EFH and dependent fishery resources do not occur as a result of the proposed leasing program. In addition, MMS' application of a newly proposed category of *Potentially Sensitive Environmental Features* also will serve to prevent impacts to hard bottom EFH associated with topographic features that may occur outside of previously defined no-activity zones protected by the MMS' topographic feature stipulations.

We find that your coordination request and the information presented in the DEIS satisfy the EFH consultation procedures outlined in 50 CFR Section 600.920 and as specified in our March 17, 2000, findings. Provided the MMS' proposed mitigating measures, our previous EFH conservation recommendations, and the standard lease stipulations and regulations are followed as proposed, NMFS agrees that impacts to EFH and associated fishery resources resulting from



activities conducted under the 2007-2012 lease sales would be minimal. Therefore, unless future changes to the action are proposed or new information becomes available, no further EFH consultation is required for this action.

In addition to our evaluation of the EFH assessment incorporated in the DEIS, we have determined that the DEIS adequately describes NMFS trust resources and analyzes potential impacts to those resources. Accordingly, we have no comments or recommendations on the content of or analyses presented in the DEIS.

Thank you for initiating EFH consultation on the 5-year program and providing the opportunity to review the DEIS. If you have any further questions, please contact Ms. Heather Young at (409)766-3699.

Sincerely,



Miles M. Croom  
Assistant Regional Administrator  
Habitat Conservation Division

cc: (via electronic mail)  
F - Lindow  
F/HC - Bigford  
PPI - Kokkinakis  
F/SER - Keys  
F/SER3 - Bernhart  
F/SER46 - Young  
F/SER46 - Ruebsamen  
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